

Matter of Fact

By Joseph Alsop

Harsh Test for Johnson

THE NEW crisis in South Viet-Nam has two linked meanings of the gravest sort. It means, first, that the expedient adopted by President Johnson when he sent Gen. Maxwell Taylor to Saigon has failed abruptly, decisively and irrevocably.

Alsop

It means, second, that the President is going to have to make a brutally stern choice in the very near future—quite possibly within ten days. The choice is between ordering really drastic steps to change the course of the Vietnamese war, or passively accepting an eventual defeat which will endanger this country's whole position as a power in the Pacific.

Among the responsible American policymakers, there is near-unanimity on both these points. Until Gen. Taylor's views have been heard and digested, however, it is fruitless to expect a final opinion from the policymakers on the second point. They agree the choice stares the Government in the face, but they wish to hear Taylor before deciding how the choice ought to be made.

In the fairly breathless interval before the final decision must be taken, it is worth trying to see just what has happened, beginning with the failure above-noted. The word "failure" may justifiably be used because the Taylor mission to Saigon was primarily intended to avoid the stern choice that is now called for.

IN LATE winter and early spring, the Government analysts began to say with increasing emphasis that the war in Viet-Nam was going very badly indeed and that it would end in defeat unless severe corrective measures were

soon taken. All such measures necessarily involved the direct use of American military power against the Communist North Vietnamese, in order to force them to halt their aggression.

After much agonized debate, President Johnson decided to make one last attempt to make the war go better by other means. Gen. Taylor was sent to Saigon as Ambassador, and U. Alexis Johnson was chosen as Taylor's working partner, in the hope that the very best men at the President's disposal could strengthen Gen. Nguyen Khanh and help him to hearten the South Vietnamese resistance to the Communists.

As these words are written, the outlines of the post-crisis situation in Saigon are decidedly misty. But one thing is abundantly clear. The Taylor mission has not produced the desired result — through no fault of Gen. Taylor's, to be sure.

The renewed internal crisis in South Viet-Nam makes it quite certain, in fact, that the trend of the war hereafter will be downwards, unless something bold is done to reverse the trend. Time presses, moreover. Another internal crisis may soon install a "neutralist" government in the South, thus ending the war by a thinly-veiled surrender.

IN THIS situation, Gen. Taylor's views are of enormous importance for a quite simple reason. The more timid Washington policymakers are beginning to say that South Viet-Nam is "just saving anyway," and that it is not worth trying to salvage the unsalvageable.

If Gen. Taylor shares this opinion, that will probably end the argument. Reportedly, however, Taylor most emphatically does not share this opinion. If this proves

to be the case, the inner Government debate will then lie between those who are willing to run very heavy risks to avert the gigantic American defeat which now threatens, and those who think the risks too high and prefer accepting the defeat.

The calculations of risk have been somewhat altered since the episode in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Chinese Communists responded to the vigorous American action in the Gulf by sending into North Viet-Nam a few obsolete bombers. The obvious intent is to threaten retaliatory bombing of Saigon, if U.S. or South Vietnamese aircraft again attack North Vietnamese targets.

This is a serious development. But the much more serious development which might have been expected has not occurred. Neither the Chinese nor the North Vietnamese have redeployed their ground forces for swift retaliatory attack, in the event of further use of American power against the North. Prudent planning cannot ignore the possibility that a widened war will escalate to ground fighting, but the possibility seems somewhat more remote now than formerly.

AMONG THE policymakers, there is no tendency to be mealy-mouthed about the present predicament. If defeat in South Viet-Nam is passively accepted, all admit that this defeat will be the worst and most costly that the United States has submitted to in this century. The Asians expect us to accept defeat, as is proven by President Sukarno's recent, unprecedented admission to his Cabinet of a hardline communist, Njoto.

Deciding whether to fulfill these expectations will be a harsh test indeed for President Johnson. But the test cannot be wished away. In 1964, The Washington Post Co.

President Johnson's Gamble

IT IS NOW pretty clear that President Johnson is going to gamble heavily on his own good luck in South Viet-Nam. The gamble will consist in doing nothing very drastic or dangerous in Southeast Asia for another couple of months.

Beyond much doubt, the quasi-cataplexy that customarily overtakes the U.S. Government in election years has played its role in the decision to take this gamble. But in justice to the President, it must also be said that no other sort of decision has as yet been pressed for by the exceedingly able U.S. policymakers who have long experience on the Vietnamese problem.

In the abstract, it is interesting to speculate on what the President might have done—given the character of his election strategy—if Gen. Maxwell Taylor had come home from Saigon to urge drastic new departures. In fact, however, Gen. Taylor did nothing of the sort.

It will take a bit more time for the details of Gen. Taylor's report to seep out. Speaking very broadly, however, the President's able Ambassador to South Viet-Nam appears to have made three main points.

FIRST, being a sensible man, Gen. Taylor did not paint the existing political

situation in Saigon in anything resembling rosy colors. But he somewhat downgraded the impression of instability that recent events in Saigon have given to the world.

SECOND, he based this downgrading on the argument that the South Vietnamese army was still sound, in good trim, and anything but ready to surrender. The armed forces, he further argued, were the key to the political situation, and continued resistance therefore depended on the armed forces' will to resist.

THIRD, he recommended certain new American measures to encourage and invigorate the resistance—some of which may even make considerable headlines. But he refrained from recommending direct, massive reprisals against Communist North Viet-Nam, at least for the immediate future.

For obvious human and political reasons, this advice from Gen. Taylor must have been welcomed by the President. It may have been less welcome to certain of the policymakers who fear that the sands of time are running out at an alarming rate in Southeast Asia. But these men, who would have supported more drastic recommendations with enthusiasm, were hardly in a position to urge the President to take steps more painful and controversial than the Pres-

ident's man-on-the-spot thought needful.

THE FACT remains that this is a very big gamble indeed, although an understandable and a defensible gamble. There are several reasons for this. To begin with, the intricacies of the armed forces, have always been desperately hard to judge. Gen. Taylor's judgment may be wrong, as other judgments have been wrong in the past.

Then too, the signs at a minimum suggest that even if Gen. Taylor is right in all he has said, the political and military situations in South Viet-Nam are both deteriorating.

Even if there is no final blow-up, this deterioration of the political-military base in the South will make it harder and more risky, later on, to carry out a program of reprisals against the Communist North. Yet if the deterioration continues, the war will be lost in the end unless direct measures against the North are ordered.

Finally, there is a strong preventive argument against putting off the evil day of the really hard decision. The Communists and the French intelligence are working day and night, in parallel but always towards the same aim of bringing in a neutralist government in Saigon. A coup d'etat, bringing in such a government, will end the resistance. It will lead to direct negotiations with the Communists. And it will produce an eventual request to the United States to take home its aid and its military forces.

AFTER that, it will be too late to deal with the Communists in the North. The best insurance against that moment ever coming is to take the hard decision to deal with the North without much further delay. But while small insurance policies are again to be taken out, the big, decisive insurance policy is still being shirked as too costly.

This is one of those gambles, in short, that only history can judge. If the gamble fails, Lyndon B.

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AFTER THE 1960 election, the quagmire of the election, the awakening at hand. It is bound to be a rude awakening, however, even though it is nice to have the night-mare over. For some very real and difficult problems were put on the shelf for the duration of the campaign.

At the head of the list, of course, is the unending, slowly deteriorating crisis in South Viet-Nam. Peace has been one of the campaign's most strongly stressed themes; yet we may now be heading into a decidedly unpeaceful period—at least if one may judge by the trend of opinion among the policy makers now in office.

In these last weeks, in fact, there has been a marked, close-to-dramatic trend toward near unanimity on the central point. All the chief parties at interest—the State and Defense Departments, the intelligence analysts and the White House staff members—now agree that the United States cannot safely continue to deal with the Vietnamese crisis on the long established principle of "more of the same medicine."

The level of United States aid has been repeatedly raised. Repeated attempts have been made to improve the efficiency of the United States team in charge of the problem. Some progress has been achieved by the team headed by Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, most notably by the installation of a fairly acceptable civilian government, which will nonetheless leave military authority strongly concentrated in the hands of Gen. Nguyen Khanh.

BUT HERE in Washington, and among the United States team in charge in Saigon, no one of any consequence any longer blinks at the fact that the anti-Communist resistance in South Viet-Nam is being slowly eroded at the base. The erosion was formerly discerned by a minority of policy makers and loudly denounced by the rest, but it is now generally admitted.

It is admitted, too—and this is very important—that the erosion will not be halted in any of the easy ways by further injections

of United States money, men and arms. Hence the stark choice looms between permitting the erosion to continue until the anti-Communist resistance finally collapses or taking extremely drastic measures to "change the terms of the problem."

"Changing the terms of the problem" is the new group phrase for changing the strange rules of this strange war—the rules that have permitted the Communist North Vietnamese to mount a long and murderous attack on South Viet-Nam without suffering any serious damage on their own territory in the north.

LAST SPRING, the whole Government gave serious consideration to the logical, if old-fashioned,

expedient of trying to halt the North Vietnamese aggression by making the North Vietnamese pay through the nose for it. At that time, in quite large part because of the impending election, this hard decision was deferred. Gen. Taylor and U. Alexis Johnson were then sent to Saigon to see what they could do.

Gen. Taylor and his team at least prevented, or helped to prevent, the drastic and final deterioration that many expected to occur this fall. But one of the most important factors in the present situation is the reported conviction of Gen. Taylor that no alternative now remains except to "change the terms of the problem."

Another important feature of the new situation is the posture of the intelligence analysts. Late last winter, the forecasters began to say that all might be lost in Viet-Nam unless stern measures were promptly taken. In the late spring, however, greater stress began to be given to the grave possible consequences of stern measures against North Viet-Nam, such as Chinese Communist intervention on the spot or retaliation elsewhere.

Currently, the line of the analysts, which is also the line of just about all the other policymakers, is that the risks of positive, decisive action are obvious and undeniable, but that these risks of action are also less grave than the risks of inaction. For it is more and more widely agreed that failure in South Viet-Nam will put the United States out of business as a Pacific power.

THE MONTHS of the campaign have been devoted to the elaboration of whole closetsful of contingency plans for action. Most of them are based on the principle of a rolling, progressive retaliation against the North Vietnamese. Just before leaving for Texas, President Johnson ordered the contingency plans to be sorted out and posted out.

This was no hasty, temporary response to the recent successful Communist attack on the U.S. B-57 bombers at the Bien Hoa airfield. It was the beginning of a process of careful, painful choice that can be expected to take some time to produce a result. Nothing is likely to be more important in the time

Matter of Fact

The Deceptive Calm

THERE IS no parallel in recent memory for the present state of the U.S. Government. A decision of such consequence immediately impends that it can only be compared to the earlier decisions to resist the pressure on Berlin, to meet the challenge in Korea, and to force the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.

Matter of Fact

The Deceptive Calm

Like these earlier decisions, the President's impending decision about South Viet Nam will directly invite a gigantic catastrophe, if he seizes the do-something horn of the dilemma; or it will risk a dangerous storm, if he seizes the do-something horn. But in these fairly dramatic circumstances, the Johnson Administration continues to wear an air of strange, lethargic calm.

The calm is deceptive. The decision to accept defeat in Southeast Asia, or to do the hard things that will have to be done to avert defeat, will soon be made—if only because it must soon be made. Furthermore, the signs of an impending decision are already discernible, despite the apparent lethargy.

SUCH sign is the our Ambassador to Viet Nam, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, for discussions with the President and the other chief policy makers. In his reports from Saigon, Gen. Taylor has long warned that the South Vietnamese resistance to Communist aggression will not continue indefinitely, unless fairly radical measures are taken to bolster it.

In principle, at least, the Saigon embassy has also endorsed the view that the right way, indeed the only way, to bolster South Vietnamese resistance is to punish the aggression by retaliation against the North Vietnamese. Even before he reaches Washington, moreover, Gen. Taylor will be reviewing the various kinds of action against North Viet Nam that are considered feasible by the policy makers here.

Several alternative contingency plans have been prepared by a presidentially appointed task force headed by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy. The whole huge bundle of these plans was sent out to Gen. Taylor in Saigon by a special emissary, so that he could acquaint himself with all their details before plunking into the coming round of meetings in Washington.

These facts point—though not conclusively—to a future choice of the dilemma's do-something horn. But there are other signs pointing to the opposite choice. For example, the Europe-minded Under Secretary of State, George Ball, whose knowledge of Asia could be comfortably contained in a fairly small thimble, has none the less been writing memoranda advocating a negotiated settlement with the Vietnamese Communists.

BALL'S memoranda, which he has circulated fairly widely, pass over the difficulty of negotiating from weakness. They also suppress the obvious fact that any imaginable negotiated settlement at this time would amount to a concealed surrender of South Viet Nam to the North Vietnamese, and of Southeast Asia as a whole to the Chinese Communists.

The Ball memoranda further assert that the trouble in Viet Nam is damaging the United States in Europe, without bothering to note that a gigantic United States failure in Viet Nam will virtually give the European game to Gen. Charles de Gaulle. Yet the mere fact that a man in Ball's position has taken this line in writing is proof enough that the President will not receive unanimous advice.

A majority of President Johnson's chief advisers are certainly on the do-something side, and the more able and courageous appear to favor doing something pretty drastic. They consider, in fact, that the risks of inaction are much greater than the undeniably grave risks of positive action. And these men further accept the equation of this choice that must now be made with the stern choices at Berlin, in Korea and in Cuba.

The new choice may be equated with these other choices for a quite simple reason. The consequences of running away from the present choice will be as shocking as the consequences would have been, for instance, if President Kennedy had not dared take the needed steps to get the Soviet missiles out of Cuba. But in another way, there is a difference.

twice over at Berlin, a pistol was put in the rifle of the U.S. Government, in full view of the country and the world. The mere fact of the pistol made the American response much easier. But there is no pistol now. There is only the continuous but ill-defined deterioration of the situation in South Viet Nam. Hence, the final choice is not easily predictable, although it is hard to believe President Johnson will agree to open his first elective term in office with the greatest U.S. peacetime defeat.

IN CUBA, in Korea, and

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Matter of Fact

Accepting Defeat

By Joseph Alsop

SAIGON—The renewed attack of governmental chaos, which is endemic here, ought to persuade the American policy makers to face a few disagreeable facts—although it probably will not have this effect.

Fact one is simple. President Johnson was putting the cart before the horse when he grandly commanded Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor to "stabilize" South Viet-Nam's politics, as a prior condition to any new American steps to deal with the war crisis here.

In the present stage of the war crisis, South Vietnamese politics closely resembles the croquet game in "Alice"—with one important difference. The game in "Alice" was played with flamingoes for mallets and hedgehogs for balls; and their tendency to unwind caused the game's permanent instability.

But the game here is partly played with cobras for mallets and puff adders for balls, which makes it considerably more dangerous.

It is the wrong game for the American Embassy to play, and it always has been. The Vietnamese are a brave and intelligent people, but a people who are deprived of any political life of their own for a very long time. And it is most comically silly to try to organize the kind of government in Viet-Nam that will win the august approval of American editorial writers who know nothing of Asia and always seem to forget that the alternative is the black and ruthless tyranny of Asian communism.

THE RIGHT game to play here has twice been urged on President Johnson.

First, last spring when the government was headed by Gen. Nguyen Khanh and a few weeks ago when Ambassador Taylor returned to Washington after the installation of Prime Minister Tran Van Huong.

On both occasions, the President was warned that the position was deteriorating, and he was asked to consider stronger military measures to change the trend. On both occasions, the choice was unpleasant, for taking stronger measures unavoidably meant taking greater risks. And on both occasions the President dodged the choice by saying that he first wanted to see what could be done about the political situation.

Such were Gen. Taylor's instructions when he was sent out here as Ambassador. Such, once again, were Gen. Taylor's instructions at the close of the recent White House meeting. He is one of the most admirable American public servants of our time, and he has done his level best. But the general position has continued to deteriorate, just as President Johnson was warned it would, and the political situation has by no means improved.

Hence the choice that has already been twice presented to the President has now become more urgent than ever. There is no way out any longer, except to try to deal with the war crisis first, and to leave the political situation for later consideration.

If this seems a strange approach, it must be noted, first of all, that the American interest in Viet-Nam does not necessarily demand a model government in Saigon.

IT WOULD be nice to have such a government. But all that the American interest here demands—and demands imperatively—is avoidance of defeat in this

war, and this simply means prevention of a Communist takeover.

Secondly, it must be noted that dealing with the war crisis is the only way to create the essential conditions for comparative governmental stability. The government is unstable precisely because the war is going badly. It will grow more unstable as the war goes worse if the United States goes on permitting continuous deterioration in the general position.

Finally, it must also be noted that if stern measures are not taken pretty soon to change the course of this war, the United States is almost certainly doomed to suffer the greatest defeat in American history. Pearl Harbor, after all, was a mere episode, whose ultimate sequel was victory around the world. But defeat here will be both shattering and final, and both its character and its consequences will make it a bitter new experience for the United States.

There are plenty of discouraged Americans in Saigon who think the President is consciously prepared to accept defeat here. They believe that he cannot bring himself to take the measures needed to avert defeat, and they therefore suspect that he is simply planning to wait until the end comes and then to disclaim responsibility.

BUT SINCE the President has the means to avert defeat, he cannot disclaim responsibility. It will be his defeat, as well as a defeat for the American people and for millions of unhappy Vietnamese. It does not seem credible that Lyndon B. Johnson intends to accept and preside over such a defeat. But the alternatives open to him are narrowing very fast.

Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

Another Dien Bien Phu?

EVERYONE in Washington is hard at work worrying about the political situation in Viet-Nam. They should also begin worrying about the military situation which is the prime cause of the recurrent political difficulty.

Just 11 years ago, this reporter left Saigon to fly half way 'round the world for an earlier family Christmas. Doing exactly the same thing this time, with exactly the same cold dread of disaster-soon-to-come lying clammy on one's stomach, was not an agreeable experience.

Yet facts must be faced, however disagreeable they may be. And the certain fact that now needs facing is the grim similarity of the present military situation in South Viet-Nam to the Vietnamese military situation at the end of 1953, on the very eve of Dien Bien Phu.

By December, 1953, the Communists had managed to stretch the defense to the utmost, leaving the French high command with almost no reserves in hand. This year, once again, the defenders' resources are badly overstretched. The central reserve amounts to hardly a division and a half, and a good part of this slender reserve is actually pinned down in the Saigon area, because of the strength of the Communist underground in the city.

IN DECEMBER, 1953, the Communists also had large reserves outside the war zone, in the form of the newly trained division in China whose commitment in Viet-Nam then caused the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu. This year, once again, the Communist reserves outside the war zone

are extremely important, theoretically comprising the entire North Vietnamese army. And units of this reserve have almost certainly begun to be infiltrated southward, over the Ho Chi Minh trail.

This startling fact must be deduced from recent captures of very young North Vietnamese draftees in South Viet-Nam. No general in his senses would send youthful conscript soldiers to serve as hard-core cadres in guerrilla fighting. Hence it is as certain as anything can be that the draftees were sent to the southern front with their battalions.

The appearance of organized units of the North Vietnamese army in the southern fighting is a new and startling fact, which might well divert the State Department's wrath from Gen. Nguyen Khanh to Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. To be sure, this movement southward is not large by normal standards. It cannot as yet amount to more than a couple of battalions a month.

But the war in South Viet-Nam is fought province by province. In province after province, the balance of the fighting is already close. And in too many provinces, a local catastrophe can too easily result from the injection of no more than one or two additional main-force enemy battalions.

IN QUANG NAI, for example, the anti-Communist forces have already been pushed back so far that the enemy controls just about the entire province, except for the main town and two or three other strong points. In main-force battalions, moreover, the balance in Quang is probably already about seven to five in favor of the Communists.

Obviously, therefore, there is grave risk in Quang Nai of some such local catastrophe as the capture of the

provincial capital and the destruction or capture of all the defense forces by a Communist surprise attack. This is not the only province, either, where risks are being run. In Darlac, to name another, the odds are now better than even on a second Communist-inspired rising of the Rhade tribespeople.

Logically, of course, a mere local catastrophe in Quang Nai or some other province ought not to achieve decisive results for the Communists. This kind of logic is very popular, nowadays, with the U.S. staff officers in Saigon. They seem to forget that it was also quite illogical for France to be decisively defeated at Dien Bien Phu, which was a very small scale fight by normal standards.

The Vietnamese people have been at war for too many years, with no end in sight. On their resistance as on the French, a mere local catastrophe can all too easily produce decisive effects. The raw materials for another Dien Bien Phu are plainly present.

TO BE SURE, there is one vast, potentially saving difference between 1954 and 1953. This is not just Viet-Nam's war. It is also our war; and the U.S. has gigantic uncommitted reserves. But unless we soon begin to bring American power to bear in deadly earnest, we must get ready for the greatest American defeat in the history of the United States.

That is what now looms ahead, as a clear possibility if not a probability. And using Laotian pilots, in training planes converted into bombers, to attack the Ho Chi Minh trail cannot be described as bringing American power to bear in deadly earnest.

...on the record briefings by the President himself, the White House has been putting out the word that no further military action will be taken to save the situation in Viet-Nam.

This no doubt represents the President's current intention. It is completely of a piece with his rejection of two successive recommendations from our Ambassador in Saigon, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, to retaliate more drastically against the North Vietnamese Communists.

The first recommendation was made at the time of the fight in the Gulf of Tonkin, during the summer. On that occasion, the President indeed ordered limited air retaliation on North Vietnamese shore installations, after the Communist attack on the destroyer Maddox. Thinking this one-shot retaliation inadequate, however, Gen. Taylor urged more sustained and powerful action against the Communist north. He was overruled.

The second recommendation was made at the time of the Communist attack on American planes on Bien Hoa airfield, just before election day. On this occasion, Taylor's request for a strong tit-for-tat was flatly turned down.

In his off-the-record briefing, the President apparently intimated that his reason for sticking to a passive, more-of-the-same policy was that he wished to avoid a conflict with Communist China. It is crucial to note, however, what kind of conflict with Communist China seems in any degree probable.

THE FACTS indicating what is probable are quite simple. First, the Chinese Communists have repeatedly and vociferously said that they would come to the aid of the North Vietnamese in the event of an American attack on the north. But they have conspicuously failed to specify the kind of aid they have in mind.

Second, the Chinese moved some air power southwards after the fight in the Gulf of Tonkin. A number of some of the ancient Chinese Ming dynasty aircraft were moved to North Vietnam. In addition, there have been reports of Chinese military aid to the North Vietnamese. The Chinese have also moved some air power southwards.

also given to the North Vietnamese.

This air redeployment points to a probable Chinese intention to join in the air defense of North Viet-Nam, and perhaps to fight in the air another way, if the President changes his mind and orders air retaliation for the increasingly flagrant Communist aggressions.

But the Chinese air force is both small in numbers and mainly equipped with obsolescent and downright obsolete planes. Hence, the main effect of this particular kind of aid to North Viet-Nam ought to be the rapid destruction of the Chinese air force by the superior American force.

THIRD, AND most important, the Chinese have made no preparations whatever to move on the ground. In South China, there are still the same two garrison armies that have been there for years, one of which is actually stationed on the Burma-Asian border. No reinforcements have been brought in. No forward stocks of supplies have been built up. None of the toilsome advance work has been done that an efficient ground movement always demands.

This does not mean that Chinese action on the ground is absolutely impossible. All governments are unpredictable in crunches. Joseph Stalin thought that American action could be ruled out when he ordered the aggression in Korea, and he was much mistaken.

But Communist governments are both tougher-minded and longer-headed than democratic governments. The pattern of Chinese preparations quite certainly means that the Chinese Communists do not now plan to take the only kind of counteraction that would create a serious problem in the event of U.S. action against North Viet-Nam. In short, the intelligence in the President's hands, unless it has been most eccentrically distorted, must label Chinese air aid to the North as the sole move that is really likely.

Thus the probable risks of U.S. action, though grave, are at least limited. The possible risks of inaction are much greater. But it is also as certain as anything can be that aggressive inaction, as the President has repeatedly intimated he proposes, is not a viable alternative. In a word, the only way to avoid a serious situation is to act.

...expert to end in the abyss unless you make the required effort to stop sliding.

THE UNPLEASANTNESS of making the required effort does not need underlining. But it must certainly be underlined that the catastrophe now being invited will also be remarkably unpleasant. For Lynton B. Johnson, Viet-Nam is what the second Cuban crisis was for John F. Kennedy. If Mr. Johnson ducks the challenge, we shall learn by experience about what it would have been like if Kennedy had ducked the challenge in October, 1962. But this is a complex problem, needing examination in a further report.

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Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

The Furtive War

THE SIGNS SUGGEST that President Johnson will shortly be paying through the nose for one of his strangest and strongest traits. Because of his extreme secretiveness and his hankering to stage-manage the news, he has been trying to fight a major war



Alsop

in what can only be described as a furtive manner. The want of candor which the President has imposed on his Administration was again illustrated by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's recent press conference.

The Secretary said that the total of U.S. troops in South Viet-Nam would soon rise to 75,000. He noted the presence of nine battalions of North Vietnamese regular army in the South. And he had encouraging things to say about the effectiveness of U.S. bombing attacks on the North.

IN REALITY, a planned total of close to 90,000 U.S. troops in South Viet-Nam was approved as long ago as the last Pearl Harbor meeting. This total has lately been substantially increased, furthermore, unless the President has rejected the fairly urgent recommendations of his field commanders, as transmitted by Ambassador Maxwell Taylor.

In reality again, the presence of nine battalions of North Vietnamese in the South means that South Viet-Nam has now been invaded by an entire division of the North Vietnamese army. But Secretary McNamara carefully avoided that clear-cut, word, "invasion."

Nor did he note the probability that the invading

units of North Vietnamese regulars actually exceed one division. Nor did he point out the very large numbers of North Vietnamese regular soldiers sent in for use as replacements in many of the allegedly local Viet Cong "main force" units.

In reality, once again, American bombers have never once hit the main fuel stores in North Viet-Nam. Until a week ago, moreover, no target had ever been attacked on the northern road leading into Laos and linking up with the Ho Chi Minh trail, which has been the main supply route to the South at least since the U.S. bombing began. And these facts surely have considerable bearing on the effectiveness of the U.S. bombing program.

ALL THIS IS in one piece with the public discussion of the role of the U.S. combat units stationed in South Viet-Nam or on the way there. When the first units were sent, they were officially described as intended to "provide local, close-in security." Now the official phrase is "combat support" for the South Vietnamese.

In reality, U.S. combat units had to be sent to South Viet-Nam because of the grave inadequacy of the reserves available to the South Vietnamese army, in the face of a Communist threat constantly strengthened from the North. But once again, the hard, perfectly understandable, entirely justifiable reality has never been plainly stated.

The want of candor, the stage management, the reluctance to admit new factors except, so to say, by inches, are not to be blamed on Secretary McNamara and the other members of the Johnson team. They are the direct results of the President's insistent impulse to

try to make it look as though the South Vietnamese war were hardly a war and as though the United States were hardly engaged.

This strange impulse is beginning to be costly. Perhaps the most worrying part of the price is the low state of morale in the Government. Morale is snake-belly low precisely because everyone has to be preoccupied with what is to be said instead of what is to be done; with how the problem is to be publicly presented, rather than with what the problem is and how it is to be solved.

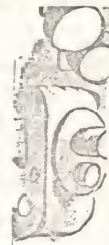
But this is not the entire price, by any means. The persistent furtiveness (there really is no other word) has sowed confusion and alarm overseas. It has promoted both confusion and divided counsel in this country, to the point that public dialogue about Viet-Nam in the United States today has almost no discernible relationship to the on-the-spot facts. In these ways, it has already begun to undermine the strong support that the President formerly enjoyed.

ALTOGETHER, this is a melancholy spectacle. Here is a President with the highest potential of greatness, with a team of men around him as good as any U.S. Government has ever boasted. Here is the gravest sort of challenge which a large majority of Americans are still convinced the country must meet without quailing or running away.

Candor is the missing element in the equation. If the President would talk turkey to the country, or would even permit his team to talk turkey, everything that needed doing would become ten times easier to do. And in that case, despite the ugliness and intractability of the Vietnamese problem, optimism for the future would be well grounded.

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Inside Report . . . By Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

The Martin Crisis